

EDITORS' PAGE

Remembering Dr. James T. Willerson



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Dr. James T. Willerson, who pioneered research on the unstable atherosclerotic plaque, passed away on September 16, 2020, after a long battle with cancer. Although Jim's research contributions had an enormous impact on the field of cardiovascular medicine, his influence extended well beyond his academic accomplishments.

James T. Willerson (or JTW as we affectionately referred to him) was the quintessential Texan: larger than life, hard-working, and determined to make a contribution to the world he walked in. Jim proudly displayed a large Texas flag on the wall of his clinical office and always wore his beloved cowboy boots. His spoke slowly with a soft and reassuring tone of voice that was never boastful, nor scornful. Born in Lampasas in the Texas Hill Country, to parents who were both physicians, Jim acquired an early love of medicine after observing the joy his parents experienced when helping others. His mother, Dr. Eleanor Willerson, who was an anesthesiologist, somehow managed to arrange a meeting with Dr. Denton Cooley when Jim was 14 years old. This encounter greatly influenced the career path that he would later pursue. His father, Dr. Darrell Willerson, was a general practitioner, who made house calls with Jim in tow. Jim Willerson attended the San Antonio Academy and the Texas Military Institute, leading the swimming team to a state championship. He went to the University of Texas (UT) at Austin as a pre-medical student, supported by a competitive swimming scholarship. After graduation from UT Austin, he attended Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, where he became reacquainted with Denton Cooley, who continued to make a strong impression on him. Jim left Texas for a short time to complete his training in internal medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. At Massachusetts General Hospital, Jim was greatly influenced by Dr. Roman DeSanctis, a clinician's clinician, and by Dr.

Edgar Haber, who was a renowned physician scientist working in the field of immunology

In 1972, Jim Willerson was recruited to UT Southwestern Medical School Faculty and Parkland Hospital in Dallas to help build their nascent cardiology programs. He remained in Dallas for 22 years and eventually became the chief of Cardiology and professor of Medicine at UT Southwestern. He was legendary for paging medical students for pre-dawn bedside rounds to impart his finely honed clinical skills. In 1989, he was offered the position of chairman of Internal Medicine at UT Houston Medical School, and he was invited by Denton Cooley to lead the research programs at the Texas Heart Institute (THI). He subsequently rose to become the president of the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston in 2001, which oversaw the Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Dentistry, Public Health, and Graduate Medical Education. Jim was largely responsible for raising the funding to build the Institute of Molecular Medicine at UT Health Science Center and played an important role in recruiting Ferid Murad to UT. Murad was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1998, along with Robert F. Furchgott and Louis J. Ignarro, for their discovery of the role of nitric oxide as a signaling molecule in the cardiovascular system. After stepping down as president of the UT Health Science Center, Jim was appointed as the president of THI in 2008 where he continued to work closely with Denton Cooley to establish THI as one of the pre-eminent clinical cardiovascular and research programs in the country. At the time of his death, Jim was serving in the capacity of president emeritus at THI.

Dr. Willerson was a prolific investigator, who published over 1,000 peer-reviewed papers. His research concentrated on the control of vasomotion, the detection and treatment of unstable atherosclerotic plaques, and the discovery of the genes and abnormal proteins responsible for cardiovascular disease. He was also among the first investigators to

FIGURE 1 The Authors With JTW



(Left) Drs. Mann and Willerson. (Courtesy of the Texas Heart Institute.) **(Right)** Drs. Willerson, Cooley, and Libby.

become involved with stem cell research to repair and regenerate damaged myocardial tissue. He was among a handful of cardiologists to become a member of the National Academy of Medicine. Jim's tenure as Editor-in-Chief of *Circulation* was the second longest on record, lasting 11 years. Under his leadership, *Circulation* moved to being published weekly. In addition to having served on numerous editorial boards for professional publications, he edited or coedited 27 textbooks, including his signature textbook, *Cardiovascular Medicine*, which is in its third edition. He received numerous awards including the James B. Herrick Award from the American Heart Association in 1993, the American College of Cardiology's Distinguished Scientist Award in 2000, the Distinguished Achievement Award from the Scientific Councils of the American Heart Association (AHA) in 2002 and the AHA's Distinguished Scientist Award in 2003, and the Gold Heart Award in 2005, which is the highest award given by the AHA.

Despite his numerous scientific accomplishments, Jim always put his patients first. It was not uncommon to see him step off of a podium when he was speaking, or leave a meeting he was chairing, so that he could answer a phone call from or about one of his

patients. He supported his trainees and faculty members with the same calm, soft, and comforting but decisive voice. His devotion to his patients and people with whom he worked was nonstop and built a huge store of well-earned affection for his support and mentorship. Many academic leaders display effective managerial skills, but Jim also brought to his many positions a special personal touch with human interactions. He demanded scientific rigor and tireless work, but he led by example and with a warmth and wisdom seldom seen in such formidable figures.

Sometimes accolades and superlatives fail to capture the true essence of who a person was. This is one of those moments. For many of us, and especially for the authors (Figure 1), JTW's life meant so much more than the sum of the different parts of his many legacies. He was a generous colleague, a wise counselor in times of need, and a steadfast friend who will be sorely missed, but never forgotten.

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